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ABSTRACT

This paper presents one sixth-grade teacher's efforts to advance curriculum at a Hawaii elementary school through continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of her learning and teaching program. Deliberate and careful reflections in personal teaching journals, meetings with an educational consultant, school administrators, and teaching colleagues, classroom observations, and student interviews were used as part of an ongoing program designed to promote an inviting, people-oriented classroom community. A child-centered classroom environment has been created in which students are encouraged to negotiate and co-plan a curriculum that includes a variety of interests and a combination of teaching methods. To maintain a high level of motivation, a reward system is used and students and their parents receive frequent positive feedback. Cooperative student-teacher work is used to model good reading and writing habits, and collaborative journal writing to encourage sharing of ideas. (Contains 8 references.) (JLS)

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INVITING SUCCESS IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM:

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE.

by

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Introduction

> The call for better education in our schools now seems almost universal in the United States. .....The central element of quality education is, of course, the teacher. Knowledgeable teachers are the core of an effective school program. (Stevenson, 1987, v)

The easiest part of becoming an "inviting" teacher is embracing the theoretical foundation of "invitational education"; the challenging part is putting that theory into practice. While much has been written on the various ways to invite school success (see Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Stanley, 1991), many teachers remain overwhelmed by the prospect of significantly restructuring their curriculums. "How do I start?", "Where do I start?", "What are the important questions I need to ask about my practices?", "How can I encourage the realization of the potential of all my students?" are familiar pleas. This paper will present the preliminary findings of one teacher's efforts to advance curriculum change at a Hawaii elementary school through a continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of her learning and teaching program. Deliberate and careful reflections in personal teaching journals; meetings with the co-author (who is an educational consultant with the state university), school administrators, and teaching colleagues; classroom observations; and student interviews are allowing for the on-going development and implementation of an active, integrated classroom program designed to promote an inviting people-oriented classroom community, tailored to cater more effectively to the needs of the children of the school's diverse community.

Theoretical Perspective

Invitational education is a collaborative approach to learning and teaching where all participants are treated as valuable, able, and responsible. Most importantly, it is founded on the premise that potential can be best realized by places, policies, and programs that are intentionally designed to invite development, and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally (see Purkey & Novak, 1984). For the purpose of this study, curriculum has been broadly defined as all aspects of the school-related experience including subject matter, social interactions, administrative policies and procedures, teaching strategies, classroom environment and management, assessment methods, and parental involvement.

In recent years, there has been a move away from transmission models of language arts learning and teaching, which emphasize the learner's passive receipt of knowledge, to models which emphasize the learner's active construction of an understanding of the world (see Au, 1993). The notion of the learner and teacher feeling whole and able is a central focus that relies on (a) the inclusion of all students, regardless of ability levels; (b) an emphasis on risk taking and feeling successful; (c) an emphasis on collaboration instead of competition, including the teaming of teachers, students, and parents; (d) a variety of instructional methods; (e) appropriate subject matter, integrated across disciplines; and (f) active involvement of

students in solving problems of real interest to them. Educators such as Maaka (1994), Purkey & Stanley (1991), and Routman (1991) believe that curriculum components such as these are important considerations in the development of a classroom environment that is a happy, nurturing place where the teacher shares with the learner the enjoyment and success of the language learning experience and where listening, speaking, writing, reading, viewing, shaping, and moving continue naturally without interruption throughout the whole day.

Data Source and Method

The teacher in this study has ten years of teaching experience across the preschool and elementary school levels. Currently, she is teaching a sixth grade class at an elementary school that is located in a densely populated area of the City and County of Honolulu, Hawaii. The student body consists of approximately 600 children from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds, although most are from lower/middle income families. The ethnic composition of the student body is very diverse, with the majority of students being a mix of Polynesian, Caucasian, and Asian ancestry. A large percentage of the students have "Pidgin" or Hawaii Creole English as their first language and struggle with the standard English requirements of the formal schooling system. Although parents are invited to become involved in the school program, many are resistant as their own experiences as students in the education system have not been positive. There are approximately 34 teachers at the school, most of whom work collaboratively to plan curriculum. Although several teachers are examining new paradigms in learning and teaching, only the teacher involved in this study is formally researching her program.

Work on this study formally began during the spring of 1994 in response to growing concerns that traditional transmission models of language arts learning and teaching, which adopt a "one size fits all" approach, are ineffective for students at this school. The teacher and the consultant are presently focusing on the first phase of the development of an inviting learning and teaching environment; the collection and examination of data that allows for the examination of salient patterns and themes within the classroom community. The teacher keeps a journal of observations and reflections regarding her curriculum and these are discussed in depth at each meeting. During the meetings, notes are taken regarding student participation, performance, attitudes, and concerns; organizational decisions; curricular plans; teacher interests and concerns; consultant input; input of school-based colleagues; and other related matters. In addition, data are being collected through classroom observations and student interviews.

Preliminary Findings and Significance

The curriculum being devised is anchored in the assumption that all students are valuable, able, and responsible and as such, the data are indicating very positive outcomes. From the first day of class, students are invited to take responsibility for making the classroom a safe, stimulating and enjoyable place to learn. Activities designed to foster community

ownership include (a) welcoming the students with high enthusiasm (Teacher--*This is going to be a wonderful year! I am so glad that you are a part of our fantastic class!*); (b) sharing personal information (Amanda--*You talked about yourself and no teacher has done that. I liked it when you had lunch with me too.*); and (c) requiring students to organize the seating, learning centers, posters boards and community rules (Jordan--*This is great! We've never had a say before*).

Similarly, students are encouraged to negotiate and co-plan a curriculum that includes a variety of interests and a combination of teaching approaches. The result of this is a rewarding learning environment where all experiences are child-centered (Teacher--*Students soon learn how important reading and writing activities are and that the learning in the classroom should relate to their lives.*). In keeping, the teacher provides a plethora of exciting and challenging opportunities for her students to experiment with the language learning process (Teacher--*My children created 'Terabithia' within our room. We had vines hanging from the ceiling and walls and a tree encasing the doorway. The children loved it!*). In order to maintain this high level of motivation throughout the year, a reward system is used that includes free assignment choices, field trips, lots of verbal praise (Teacher--*I work hard at mentioning the children's names for positive compliments.*), and reminders of the importance of self-investment (Carl--*You expected a lot from me, but I felt good about doing things. This is the best class.*).

Cooperative work is proving to be an enjoyable and effective way to promote fluency in reading and writing. For example, demonstrations by the teacher, including reading with the students and modelling good reading and writing habits, are proving effective. Similarly, collaborative journal writing is allowing the children to share their ideas and take sufficient time to work on their projects (Ricky--*I like being able to work how I like.*). An important aspect of this cooperative approach is the encouragement of parental input and every opportunity is taken to support this home involvement (Teacher--*I mail a postcard which simply states, 'Ricky did a super job on his research'. The parents and children love this!*). Assessment practices focus on both the process and product of learning. Portfolios are proving successful in encouraging children to set challenging standards and monitor the progress they make. On-going conferences with the teacher allow the students to make decisions regarding the standard of work that will be achieved and problems that need to be addressed (Teacher--*The students and I work together to set learning goals, do mini-lessons on skill areas, edit papers, evaluate writings, or discuss issues that are on the children's minds.*).

At this initial stage, this project is proving rewarding for all involved. The teacher and consultant come away from their meetings energized, but most importantly, the children are responding in ways that illustrate the effectiveness of the program. To date, students talk frequently of feeling capable of achieving success; there is greater investment and motivation to participate in the classroom program; higher standards of work are apparent, including requests for more time to read and write; fewer incidents of disruptive behavior occur; absenteeism is lower; parents are very supportive; and most importantly, students talk of school as a 'fun' place to be. The preliminary findings of this study do much to lend support

to Purkey and Novak's (1984) tenet that, "Just as students have relatively untapped resources for learning and development, so educators have relatively untapped resources for encouraging this development."

The essential role of the teacher in the creation of an inviting, people-oriented classroom community is a focus that is consistent with the AERA Program theme of "Partnerships for New America in a Global Community." By illustrating the considerable strengths that the teacher in this study brings to a school-university-community partnership to plan and implement curriculum reform, the concerns of many teachers, who feel they have little say when it comes to changing the system, are addressed. The true value of this participation, lies not so much in the pursuit of an end goal, but rather, in an empowerment to change or to maintain practices as deemed appropriate (see Cohn & Kottkamp, 1994).

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